

### **Comparative Social Policy: Theory and Research**

*Kennett, P. (2001) Buckingham: Open University Press, £15.99, paperback, 176 pp.*

As part of a new Open University Press series entitled *Introducing Social Policy*, Patricia Kennett's book represents a very good addition to the burgeoning field of comparative social policy analysis. It is written in an accessible manner and should easily find its way onto reading lists for relevant undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The book is likely to be of interest to readers with a relatively limited knowledge of the key debates in comparative social policy as well as to those who are already familiar with the topic. A broader readership is likely to be attracted by the book's emphasis on issues relating to the process and design of comparative studies in social policy. The book differs from existing texts largely in the breadth of its coverage, since its focus extends beyond the advanced industrial nations to incorporate issues relating to social policy in developing nations.

*Comparative Social Policy* is organised into five substantive chapters which are complemented by an introduction and (very) short conclusion. Kennett appropriately introduces her book with a discussion of the ways in which social policy can best be defined for the purposes of comparative analysis. She argues that definitions of social policy still tend to emphasise rather too heavily the role of the state in providing welfare to individuals. For comparative research, it is preferable to define social policy in more pluralistic terms to reflect the important roles played by other providers of welfare, such as the family, the market and the voluntary sector.

The first substantive chapter offers an overview of the changing international context and the potential impact of this on national social policy systems. With reference to globalisation trends, there is a useful (if rather routinised) summary of the key economic changes that influence the capacity of nation states to develop their social policies independently. Importantly, Kennett notes the ability of nations to resist a seemingly inevitable 'race to the bottom' when seeking to maintain their economic competitiveness alongside a well-developed welfare state. The chapter also reviews the increasing role of international bodies such as the United Nations, International Labour Organization, World Bank and World Trade Organization in determining social policy outcomes across the world. Against a background of globalisation and a general shift in economic ideology from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism, Kennett makes the useful point that the nation state continues to represent the most important player in most nations' welfare systems. Even under the influence of supranational bodies, such as the EU, individual countries tend to maintain responsibility for the central components of social policy. This factor highlights the continued relevance of undertaking cross-national comparisons of the multitude of divergent social policy systems that exist around the world.

The nature of cross-national comparison represents the subject matter for a second substantive chapter. Having reviewed a variety of definitions of comparative research, Kennett summarises the range of approaches that have been adopted in comparative social policy research. She also refers to a number of difficulties associated with comparison. A central theme of this discussion surrounds the equivalence of key concepts that are routinely employed in international studies. In order to draw attention to the potential pitfalls, the book offers a useful summary of the difficulties associated with generating comparable evidence on concepts such as 'poverty' and 'social exclusion'. The familiar message to emerge from this chapter is that there is a need to take a critical view of the findings of comparative social research, even where these are based upon seemingly equivalent concepts and respected international data sources.

In a third chapter, Kennett addresses the role of theory and analysis in cross-national social policy research. Here she reviews some of the ways in which researchers have sought to explain the

development of welfare states in comparative perspective, as well as to account for variation between welfare states. This material is covered well in other standard texts, but bears repetition. The chapter provides a critique of research that seeks to link welfare state development to the progress of industrialisation or to broad-brush modernisation theories. Attention is also paid to the potential influence of left-wing politics in producing divergent types of welfare state, and to ideas relating to postmodernism. In addressing the important strand of work on welfare regimes initiated by Titmuss and developed along different lines by Esping-Andersen and Leibfried, Kennett usefully summarises critiques of the regime-building approach. She points to the way in which feminist researchers have drawn attention to limitations associated with original attempts to compare nations (by concentrating too heavily on income-maintenance policies), and highlights weaknesses in relation to the ethnocentrism and limited coverage of welfare regime typologies. At this point it would have been useful for the book to draw attention to a more fundamental type of critique of this type of comparative social policy research emanating from the likes of Peter Baldwin. Essentially Baldwin is arguing that the exercise of placing nations into different welfare regime categories is pointless, and fails to acknowledge properly the true complexity of national social policy systems. It might also have been possible to explore the impact of other types of social divisions, such as age or health, in relation to cross-national differences in welfare systems.

In an original contribution to debates in comparative social policy, Kennett proceeds to address welfare issues in developing nations with particular attention being paid to Africa and Latin America. She points to the need to treat developing nations as a heterogeneous category in relation to social policy, with culture, history and the economy playing a major role in generating a range of different responses to individuals' welfare needs. The final substantive chapter offers an interesting analysis of the role played by gender and ethnicity in determining the boundaries of citizenship in three nations – the UK, Australia and Japan. While it is not entirely clear why these nations were selected for the analysis, Kennett shows how comparative research in social policy can yield important conclusions that highlight the strengths and weaknesses of different nations' welfare systems.

For a relatively short text intended to provide an introduction to the theme of comparative social policy, this book can be regarded as a success. It is well written and engages well with the relevant literature. As such it would represent a useful addition to the shelves of most libraries.

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